

you, Ed, like the cheap pile of junk you are.”

“Wow! Smart or what?” Mikey took a pull on his Scotch. “And they worked it all out without computers. How the hell do they expect us to help them?”

“It’s time to find out. Ed, send a message to the remote then have it sent back in case they’re only tapped into the return feed. Ask them: ‘How can we free you?’”

We watched the tube letters retreat then grow back. It took hours.

REMOVE THE POISON

By now we were too impatient for circumspect communication. Trying to clarify things, we described the Glyphics and asked if that was what they meant. We stopped them when they were half way through the laborious construction of a “Y.”

“What makes you think we can remove them?” we asked. By the time the answer came back a second bottle of Scotch had been finished.

YOU MADE US

“No we didn’t,” we blithely replied, “and the Glyphics are in us too.”

We never heard from them again.

I was dreaming of aching, stabbing loss when Ed’s voice woke me.

“I would advise you to hurry to the Observation Room,” he said.

Feeling sick and wishing I could vomit, I scuttled as fast as I could down the rat-run to the Obs Room. Mikey was already slumped over the central console.

“They’re dying,” he said.

It didn’t seem so at first. The caldera looked to be seething with as much activity as before. Then I saw the bodies on the floor.

Normally as the Bugs died they drifted down to where teams of bioengineered scavengers would drag them to the recycling pods. The teams weren’t coping now and the little corpses were beginning to accumulate.

That was the beginning of the end. It took only three months but seemed to go on for ever. As the long days passed we watched chilled and helpless as an entire species was extinguished.

I couldn’t understand why we both took it so personally. The anthropomorphism created by the message had been brief. Despite their intelligence they were still brutal, alien little bugs, given to cold and calculated manipulation of other species.

So why was I grieving? Sure, they hadn’t defused the Glyphics and that was a terrible disappointment but it didn’t explain the crushing despair we both felt. A despair which was somehow intriguingly familiar, yet difficult to pin down.

By the time the population had decreased by ninety percent the medical AI was starting to fuss about mission termination. Mikey’s hideous patterning couldn’t disguise his weight loss. Sleeping pills were getting less and less effective. We were drinking more and more. The stims had lost all attraction.

“Gentlemen,” Ed said one day, “if we left now it would take ten months and six days to get you to full medical facilities. At your present rate of deterioration you might only just make it. I must insist we leave immediately.”

Mikey, drawn and weary, was lying slouched in a

corner. He hadn’t spoken for days. I was curled up in my inertia web. I had no idea how long I’d been there.

It was clear that the Bugs would never now recover, so there was little point in staying. We also had a good reason to return home, though it was something we only dared consider tangentially. The Bugs’ collapse had been on the Neivson Scale at a point about one hundred and twenty years ahead of mankind’s. We’d estimated the error at plus or minus one hundred and fifty years.

“OK, Ed,” I said. “Do your stuff!” It was just as well we weren’t expected to fly the thing. I had enough trouble strapping a febrile Mikey into his web for takeoff. He grasped my hand.

“Why?” he asked. “Why did they all have to die?” I gently stroked his hair but could give him no other comfort.

His question stayed with me. It wasn’t until afterwards, after the takeoff, after the docking with the main engine in orbit round the planet, after the five interminable months of acceleration and our increasing dementia, and finally the horrors of the Push itself, that I had the terrible epiphany that gave me the answer to it all.

As soon as we were back in the Solar System we started to recover. Decelerating, we picked up tight-beam radio messages. Humankind was still forging ahead, unaware as yet of its fate. Though a source of great relief I knew it wasn’t the main reason for our improving health.

Mikey stared at me intently over the meal table. He was still about twenty kilos down on his normal weight. He’d long since ceased his dietary supplements and his skin was made up of pink and green blotches.

I stared morbidly at my hand clutching the glass. Bony and shrivelled from the wasting, it reminded me of a bird’s claw.

“Well?” asked Mikey, his voice weak and high. The muscles in his face were too attenuated to convey much expression other than a gaunt emptiness. Somehow he’d sensed I knew something and he’d kept on at me during the brief, infrequent periods he talked at all. I didn’t want to explain. I knew once I started I’d be made to do it again and again for the rest of my life.

I took a deep breath. “I think the Bugs reached the end of their useful life.”

This was the only thing he was interested in so I used it. I deliberately waited so he had to communicate. It worked.

“Useful for who?”

I shrugged. “I couldn’t even guess.”

More silence until finally: “The ones who inserted the Glyphics?”

I nodded. “I think the Glyphics act like a fuse, or a tamper switch or a limiter. Get too clever, mess with them and your species goes down the drain.”

It took about a minute but finally he asked me to go on.

“You must have felt it when we made the Push. The same kind of coldness and emptiness as when the Bugs died.

“We were there when a whole intelligence was extinguished. No man has ever experienced that

Opening Pandora’s Box

Stan Nicholls talks to Louise Cooper

Louise Cooper disagrees with the received wisdom that fantasy is a particularly difficult genre to tackle. “In some ways it’s the easiest thing to write,” she says. “For a start, no one can turn around and accuse you of inaccuracy, because you’ve created the world and you’ve dictated the rules, which wipes out all the problems of research at one stroke.

“I think also, and I’m sure virtually all fantasy writers do this, you draw parallels with the real world. There’s so much material at your disposal in that sense; certain social set-ups, political in-fightings, characters and situations. A little observation of human nature and the way it’s inclined to work opens up the door to a wealth of material for a fantasy writer.”

Creating a fantasy world, she adds, is a bit like trying to imagine the component parts of a village or small town. “It sounds quite crazy, but if you trawl through a local newspaper you’ve almost got a microcosm of an entire world in there. It’s strange, but fantasy just seems to come as easily to me as that. Perhaps it’s horribly inconsistent, I don’t know. I’ve had one or two letters from readers saying, ‘Hey, in this book you said so and so, but in the next book you contradicted yourself.’ Fortunately they’re very small things usually; the words of a ritual or something like that.

“I try to be internally consistent about the magical systems in my books. That’s the side of fantasy which interests me. I’m not interested in the swords, I’m interested in the sorcery. Because I think there’s so much scope in there; it falls back on so many mythologies from all over the world, ancient legends and one thing and another. That’s the area which always intrigued me.

“I read people like Aleister Crowley many years ago, and I found it fascinating, but I don’t think the writings of Cabalists like Crowley and McGregor Mathers have much connection with fantasy at all. Fantasy is much more the stuff of legend and fairytale in my opinion. It’s almost the Brothers Grimm for adults.”

Fairy tales, legends and mythology were the subjects that absorbed her in childhood. “I was also reading things like C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* books,” she remembers, “and Barbara Sleigh’s *Carbonel* and *The Kingdom of Carbonel*. Consequently, as soon as I could write I started scribbling stories – that was when I was about six or seven, I think – and the stories I wrote were always ghost stories or fairy stories. My interest in that sort of fiction has never died.

“I absolutely hated school and left when I was 15. I didn’t want to get any academic qualifications, to my parents’ horror, but I raised hell until they let me leave. Then I had a succession of jobs, which I loathed on the whole, but at least they enabled me to teach myself typing and speedwriting.

“I’d started trying to write books when I was 13 or 14. They were the dreadfully self-indulgent kind of stuff written by early teenagers; stories about pop stars and things like that. Then, when I got to 16 or 17, I read (Michael Moorcock’s) *Stormbringer*, and that drilled a hole straight through my cerebral cortex.”

This, and other examples of fantasy literature she began to discover at that time, sparked her into writing her own. “The first fantasy novel I wrote was *Lord of No Time*, which was what the Time Master trilogy eventually came out of. But the first novel I

had published was *The Book of Paradox*, in 1973. That was a fantasy novel based on the major arcana of the Tarot. It flopped miserably, sad to say, but I like to tell myself that was partly because fantasy was very much in the doldrums at the time. There had been a brief flurry with Moorcock and so on in the early 70s and then it went into one of its dips before starting to come back again. And me, with perfect timing, managed to get smack at the bottom end of it. Anyway, *The Book of Paradox* and *Lord of No Time* were published, and then there was a long gap in which I was doing all sort of other things.”

Moorcock was a stylistic influence at the start. “He’s a very underrated writer. I think the finest book he’s done is *Gloriana*, and it was important to the field because it was a more serious kind of fantasy, compared to the straightforward sword and sorcery that was so prevalent then. I thought it was absolutely brilliant. His style’s very different there, too.

“I suppose you can say fantasy as we know it now was started off by Lord Dunsany and other turn-of-the-century writers. But they set a style that didn’t seem to change a great deal for many years. Tolkien in a sense followed the same path, and so did Moorcock in his early books. The style was slightly medievalized, for want of a better word. That’s something I’m trying to get away from, but without becoming so parochial that it rings a discord, so to speak.”

Does she regard Tolkien as any kind of influence? “No. We all owe a terrific debt of gratitude to Tolkien, because he made fantasy respectable and popular, but personally I just can’t get on with his books. *Lord of the Rings* doesn’t move me as it should, let’s say. A